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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [MOPS](#) [KISL](#) [RP](#)
SUBJECT: PHILIPPINE MUSLIM LEADERS DENOUNCE ASG BEHEADINGS

REF: A. MANILA 1285
[B](#). MANILA 1231
[C](#). MANILA 1206
[D](#). MANILA 1187

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary. Government security forces on Jolo have recovered the headless bodies of seven workers, whom elements of the Abu Sayyaf Group had recently decapitated. Muslim political and religious leaders in Mindanao, including the Moro National Liberation Front, are strongly denouncing the beheadings as "un-Islamic" and describing such acts of terrorism as "evil." In response to the gruesome murders, Malacanang ordered the Armed Forces of the Philippines to "obliterate" all remaining ASG members in Sulu. The AFP has begun a new offensive on Jolo Island entitled "Operation Ultimatum-Kaunlaran (Progress/Development)," maintaining its simultaneous focus both on military operations against terrorists and on civil-humanitarian programs, with support from the USG. End Summary.

Decapitated Bodies Found

[1](#)2. (U) Following the recovery of the headless bodies of seven workers whom the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) decapitated (ref a) on April 20 near the Parang-Indanan boundary in Jolo, Philippine officials transported five victims to their grieving family members in Zamboanga City on April 21. Burial services for the other two victims took place on Jolo.

"Terrorism is Evil"

[1](#)3. (U) Islamic religious leaders in Mindanao strongly denounced acts of terrorism in the aftermath of the beheadings. "Terrorism is evil. Terrorism is indiscriminate. An act of terror does not distinguish between combatant and civilian, innocent or guilty," according to a sermon (or khutba) on April 20 in mosques throughout the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao.

[1](#)4. (U) Aleem Sharif Jul Aberin, the mufti or guardian of the House of Opinion of Sulu, told the press that those who committed the beheadings had "lost sense of the basic belief that God was all just." Aleem Mohammad Sulaiman of the Mindanao Ulama Congress blamed the crime on the "ignorance" of the perpetrators.

[1](#)5. (SBU) A senior adviser to Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) Chairman Nur Misuari privately admitted to poloff that the decapitations of the seven hostages were "an insult to

all Muslims" and a "direct challenge to Islamic tradition." He described Nur Misuari as "furious" and "disheartened" over the beheadings. One of Misuari's key spiritual advisor reportedly also condemned the beheadings as "un-Islamic."

AFP maintain dual focus on Jolo

¶6. (U) The beheadings drew a sharp response from Malacanang on April 20, with President Arroyo publicly directing the Armed Forces of the Philippines to "obliterate" all remaining ASG members in Sulu. In her press statement, Arroyo said that "the Philippines has zero tolerance for terrorists, within and even beyond our borders."

¶7. (SBU) In private comments to Embassy officers, a former senior Philippine defense official expressed the view that the beheadings were a sign of the ASG's "total desperation." "They're on their last legs," he said. According to this Arroyo loyalist, the Philippine government was near the "tipping point" on Jolo. "We're doing the right thing there, and we're going to win," he stated.

¶8. (U) With the official conclusion of the eight-month highly successful "Operation Ultimatum" on Jolo Island, the AFP has directed Task Force Comet to initiate a new "Operation Ultimatum-Kaunlaran Progress/Development Military operations against the ASG and rogue MNLF commander Habier Malik continue, along with civil-military programs to benefit the island's residents, with advice and assistance from the U.S. Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines.

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